TECHNO-FEUDALISM: BIG CARBON AND BIG TECH'S BIG DISINFO

Introduction

On Wednesday, February 19th, 2025, the Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) coalition hosted a webinar on Techno-Feudalism: Big Carbon and Big Tech's Big Disinfo.

Featuring Professor at the University of Miami and Research Director of the Climate Social Science Network **Jennifer Jacquet**, Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) CEO **Imran Ahmed**, and FALA Founder and CEO **Thais Lazzeri**, the panel presented a case for expanding beyond just big oil and denial, in order to find the right solutions.

Hosted by CAAD communications working group co-chair Phil Newell, the hour-long discussion covered some of the many people being wrong, on purpose, for money, the problems they're causing, and what we can do about it.

Introducing the panel, Newell explained that "While mis- and disinformation are often used interchangeably, the treatments for people being wrong, and people being wrong on purpose for money, are different. So this is less about media literacy or critical thinking training for the public and helping people who want to be correct, and more focused on stopping the industrial actors from hiding how they pollute the environment, by polluting our information environment."

GOT DISINFO? "MORE CALCULATED, MORE DELIBERATE, MORE INTENTIONAL."

Challenging the "big oil" framework, Jennifer Jacquet explained how "our ambition has been shaped by the industry backlash and disinformation around the role of meat in climate change," using as an example the "Beyond Beef" campaign in the 1990s that "urged Americans in 1992 to cut their beef consumption in half by 50%."

In response, the beef industry launched a full scale attack, "attacking the book that it was based on, the book tour, they took out ads, they created campaigns, they talked about how the American cattlemen is an environmentalist," Jacquet recounted, before dropping the bombshell implication that "they have the 'Got Milk?' campaign that comes out that same year."

Now, "Our greatest ambition, at least in the United States, is Meatless Monday. It's no longer 50%. It's 1/7th. So in the face of a bigger and bigger crisis, we have diminished our ambition on how to address this problem" said Jacquet.

Yet the science remains: "we really can't reach one and a half or 2 degrees without addressing food system impacts."

But since the early 1990s, the industry has been "discouraging any changes to personal dietary choices," something that's "really important" because it means "the climate activist community can sort of retool and reconsider in light that this might actually not be a bottom up effect," or an organic reaction, Jacquet warned.

"This might not be ... how Americans are designed, but it's something more calculated, more deliberate, more intentional."

BIG TECH PLAYBOOK: DENY, DEFLECT, DELAY, THROW DOLLARS

Next, CEO of the Center for Countering Digital Hate, Imran Ahmed, took the mic, explaining: "Historically big tech's playbook has been, deny, deflect, delay. And then, if that doesn't work, throw dollars at it. It's been bad before; it's getting worse."

Ahmed pointed to Meta's "shifting to a community Notes standard, which is what Mark Zuckerberg has talked about is disastrous." However, CCDH "did a study of X's community notes last year. We found that 74% of even accurate community notes are not shown to users. We showed that the misleading posts, the posts that had to be corrected, the post itself got 13 times more views than the community notes, because they benefit from the algorithmic amplification...the way that disinformation attracts engagement. It therefore gets amplification in the algorithm. It shoots around the world. And the truth is on its tiny little legs trying to catch up."

Ahmed is no radical political activist. He has worked "closely with people who don't have any political position at all," such as "the parents who've lost their children because of eating disorders and self-harm content online." So, Imran emphasized, this isn't about partisanship-"this is about fundamental decency, and what you make a buck from."

"If you want to make a buck from repeatedly telling a 13 year old girl that she's too fat, and she should go on a 500 calorie a day diet," Ahmed continued, "I don't think that's progressive or conservative. I just think you're an asshole."

"And people shouldn't do business with you, and governments should have the ability to intervene on behalf of their public," he said, "to protect the public from disinformation, from weaponized, accelerated disinformation at a scale we've never seen before, which fundamentally destabilizes our communities, our democracy, and our mental and physical health."

Fortunately, there does seem to be hope for policy solutions. The CCDH CEO pointed out that "in the last Congress the bill with the most votes in the Senate was the Kids Online Safety Act, with 91 in favor, 3 against, I mean, there is actually movement happening all over the world. I was just in Cape Town. There's movement in South Africa. I'm going to

Montreal shortly. There's movement in Canada with an online safety act. Australia and New Zealand have already legislated. So there is action being taken."

Specially, "it is very important that as these platforms continue to create a system in which they can spread disinformation about climate and monetize it," he concluded, "that we use transparency as a tool to reimpose the social mores and the values that most of society hold, which is that we believe that the earth is a gift to us, and it's one that we should not squander, nor should we abuse because it has to be passed on to the next generation."

FACT CHECKING IS FREE SPEECH, AND GEN-AI "A PERPETUAL, SELF-POWERING BULLSHIT MACHINE"

In response to a question regarding "claims from people like Michael Schellenberger, that 'fact checking is actually censorship'," Imran was emphatic that "Fact checking is the fair and free, open exchange of ideas. That's what fact checking is. It is free speech!"

"No one has a duty to distribute you," he continued, "and even further, no one has a duty to put an ad on you spouting off to camera about how the climate isn't changing and the Martians are coming. I mean, it's just ridiculous."

Another attendee asked about generative AI, which is "a real problem," according to Ahmed, because "it's reduced the marginal cost of each additional message to each additional person to 0. So the actual cost to the producer of disinformation for distributing something to a billion people is not that you have to print a billion leaflets, and then you have to go and get them to people. It reduces everything to 0."

He then put it another way, positing that if "we're in the nuclear age of disinformation, Generative AI turns this into the thermonuclear age, because what it does is it reduces the marginal cost of the production of a piece of content to 0. And theoretically, what you can do is connect the two up so Generative AI can be producing disinformation narratives, seeding them onto social media, then reviewing what works best, with whom, and then using that to refine the pitch. And so you have a perpetual, self-powering bullshit machine."

SUPPLY CHAIN OF LIES THAT DELAY AND UNDERMINE CLIMATE ACTION

Brazilian journalist and founder of FALA Thais Lazzeri then offered a tantalizing idea: could the thirtieth annual UN climate negotiations "COP30 go viral in Brazil?" before immediately recalibrating expectations: "Yeah, but probably not the way we need it to be" because "lies spread 70% faster on social media than the truth."

Still, Lazzeri offered, "we have solutions," to what she's termed "the supply chain of lies that delays and undermines climate action," the enablers of the industry, " the professional disinformers" and corporations "gaining influence, money and power."

For what? "to disturb the idea of reality." Because while climate impacts may alert the public to the need for climate action, lies and conspiracy theories spread by Big Tech offer up other, non-climate explanations. "Last year we had in Brazil a massive flood," Lazzeri explained, "and one of the most shared pieces of content was about Madonna." Yes, that Madonna, the pop super-star. Supposedly, per the conspiracy theory, "Madonna created a ritual and made the rain." And of course, "this is not possible," but that's the point, it's "changing the reality impacting people."

Even in Portuguese language social media, climate disinformation is an incredibly widespread problem, mentioning one researcher's finding of "6 million pieces of climate disinformation during a year. Just in Brazil. Just in Portuguese."

In2023 FALA started "monitoring on Youtube. And every month we captured like 5,000 new videos on climate disinformation."

Fortunately, Lazzeri listed off a series of positive steps towards solutions, from their work at FALA " inspiring real change and concrete actions through storytelling and strategic communication" to high-level calls for a fossil fuel ad ban and action against climate disinformation, to the G20 announcement of Brazil's "Global Initiative on Information Integrity."

Looking Forwards Towards COP-30

On March 24 - 25, CAAD,FALA, and the Conscious Advertising Network are hosting a Climate Information Integrity Summit in Brazil. The event will bring together experts and policymakers to find solutions to Big Carbon and Big Tech's Big Disinformation, as Brazil takes on the international mantle of climate leadership ahead of its hosting of COP30.